

**ASK A PRIEST –
HOW TO PRAY BETTER THIS ADVENT**



BY FR. JOHN MARK SOLITARIO, O.P.

Q. In these trying times, Mary asks us to pray and repent. The Church has many traditions, prayers, and devotions to help us pray and repent. I (and many others) do not know what these are. Do you have any guidance or references to help resurrect these prayerful devotions?

A. We Catholics tend to overlook or at least undervalue the “helps” to knowing and loving God that the Church places at our fingertips. Maybe it’s because we need to take a fresh look at things, hearing God’s Word anew and seeing it fulfilled in the Church’s daily life.

As Advent begins, it is good to rediscover the “treasure chest” that is the Sacred Liturgy, the Church’s official public worship. The Liturgy of the Hours, the Eucharistic Sacrifice of the Mass, and the devotional life that flows from these take on a stark, anticipatory, and deeply beautiful character. The readings and prayers speak of our thirst for God, our need for the Savior, and our wonderment in meeting Christ. An excerpt from the fourth section of the Catechism (On Prayer) provides a starting point in this respect:



“In the sacramental liturgy of the Church, the mission of Christ and of the Holy Spirit proclaims, makes present, and communicates the mystery of salvation, which is continued in the heart that prays. The spiritual writers compare the heart to an altar. Prayer internalizes and assimilates the liturgy during and after its celebration. Even when it is lived out ‘in secret,’ prayer is always the prayer of the Church; it is communion with the Holy Trinity.”¹

The short answer to your question seems to be to let your heart be joined to the Church through her official prayer life, especially through participating fully and consciously in the Mass. Of course, this can be done with varying levels of success, so a couple practical suggestions should be helpful. I will refer to the image of the “altar of the heart” mentioned by the Catechism:

1. **Let your heart be “chiseled” throughout Advent to be a place where prayer can be offered to God.** This happens in fulfillment of our Baptism, when we were each given a share in Christ’s priesthood such that we can offer pleasing prayers in Jesus’ Spirit to the Father. Only sin can dull this sacramental power. If we have become de-sensitized to the dignity and demands of Baptism, we should listen attentively to the proclamation of St. John the Baptist this Advent, “A voice crying out in the desert places...”² Listening especially to the Mass readings and making use of sacred signs and customs like Holy Water, the Rosary, Advent Wreaths, candles, etc. can help us better receive the Word of God *and act on it*.

2. **Let your heart be cleansed and anointed through the Sacrament of Reconciliation and, after that, through the Penitential Prayers of the Mass.** Like those who first heard Jesus, repentance from sin is the first step to embracing his life-giving Gospel. The Church’s Liturgy helps us to recall and confess our infidelities toward God and neighbor in many ways: “May God who enlightens every heart help you to know your sins and trust in His mercy.”³

3. **Let your heart become the resting place of Jesus by devoutly receiving Holy Communion.** Let this moment be the apex of your Christmas celebration, and remember to give thanks and pray for those who have not yet received Jesus into their hearts. So many long to receive at Christmas the joy, peace, and merciful love that Jesus uniquely brings into the world. Model your prayer after Mary, who “treasured these things in her heart.”⁴

With hearts renewed as living “altars” of God, this Advent we might repeat a prayer such as this one in order to anticipate the best Gift of Christmas and be ready to share Him with others:

*Grant us, Lord, as we honor with joyful devotion the Nativity of Your Son, that we may come to know with fullness of faith the hidden depths of this mystery and to love them ever more and more. Through Christ our Lord.*⁵

“Ask a priest” will be a regular format for our Holy Teaching section in the coming months. Submit your own question to bulletin@stgertrude.org for one of our Dominican priests to answer in the bulletin!

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) para 2655.
² See Matthew 3:1-12, the Gospel reading for the Second Sunday of Advent (2020, Year A).
³ Optional Greeting Prayer used by the priest in the Rite of Penance.
⁴ Cf. Luke 2:19.
⁵ Prayer after Communion, Mass at Dawn, The Nativity of the Lord (Roman Missal).